

Indiana Department of Environmental Management

Lori F. Kaplan, Commissioner

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(Text does not include verbatim comments)

When I received the invitation to speak at this meeting back in August, the letter from John Shettle (alliance president) said the vote to invite me as the speaker was unanimous. I'm honored by that. I bet Al Gore and George Bush wish they could be as lucky.

I do appreciate the invitation, and I'll tell you up front: the kind of work you do makes the kind of work I do easier. Your mission statement lays out your goals of improving and protecting this watershed by consolidating data, integrating planning and priorities and encouraging the development of smaller watershed partnerships.

That's what we at IDEM want to do for all of Indiana, from Lake Michigan in the north to the Ohio River in the south: gather information, coordinate efforts and join forces to protect our waterways.

Of course I think it's a safe bet that there is one waterway you want to hear about most: the White River. And I am happy to report that the river is doing very well and that the progress being made on the 50 mile stretch between Anderson and Indianapolis is considerable.

The White River has been on people's minds - especially mine - a lot lately. Ever since the contamination incident last December, whenever I have speaking engagements, no matter where I go - it seems as though everyone wants to know about the White River.

You may think I get tired of talking about this river. Well, let me tell you - I don't. All of the interest paid to the White River reinforces how much Hoosiers, especially those of us who live in central Indiana, care about it and how important the bodies of water are to our quality of life.

The White River touches a lot of people in a lot of ways, whether for recreation, drinking water, or for simple enjoyment of its aesthetic beauty. Water can be like a magnet. How many times have you driven across a bridge over a river and stared off to the side for a fleeting look at the water? And like me, how frustrated do you get by Dept. of Highways barricade that block the view? We all tend to look towards the water and that is the connection I am talking about. The White River adds immeasurably to our lives.

After December's fish kill, some people feared the enjoyment they had known may have come to an end. The fish kill was devastating. But I am happy to report a lot has happened in the last 10 1/2 months.

The interest, enthusiasm and commitment this incident spurred has been phenomenal - and that is great for the river as well as all of Indiana. Of course, the immediate consequences to the river speak for themselves. However, those same consequences renewed our appreciation for and awareness of the White River. We learned that the river really means a lot to so many people. The incident also raised people's awareness of the fragile nature of our environment.

What I can tell you today is the stretch of the White River between Anderson and Indianapolis is alive. It is not all the way back but it continues to improve. It is on the road to recovery. It is going to be OK if we continue to care for it.

As many of you know, Governor O'Bannon and Mrs. O'Bannon began the restocking efforts last April during the Governor's Conference on the Environment. They released both mature fish and fingerlings as part of the initial restocking effort and that day was a bright spot on the White River's road back. Since April, our colleagues at the Department of Natural Resources have released more fish into the river, and other fish and fish funds were provided by White River Rescue, Friends of the White River, and many other supporters. I want to publicly thank those of you present who have contributed to these efforts.

A watershed, in many ways, is like a community. And one test of a community is how it comes together in times of need. The White River community certainly came through this time. People, citizens, government and neighbors came together to make a positive contribution and they helped correct a wrong and heal a wound.

Now, I am optimistic, but I am also a realist. It may take years to repopulate the effected portion of White River to the level that existed before this environmental incident. But I also need to remind you that rivers are resourceful and if given a chance, they can overcome civilization's worst pollution. We have seen signs of wild fish moving into those stretches of the river most significantly impaired by the contamination and the critters that are food for fish survived in sufficient numbers. By all reports from DNR and IDEM biologists, these critters are so numerous that they will provide a substantial building block in restoring the White River.

Today, I want to outline for you how we at IDEM believe we can partner with individuals, private groups and other local, state and federal governmental organizations to improve the water quality of the White River even more. Obviously, these partnerships don't and can't stop at any county or city line.

A watershed approach is really the only way to go. This fall, we held public input sessions in Muncie and Indianapolis to have dialogue about the Upper White River watershed. I believe Jim Dunaway may have discussed this a little earlier during his presentation, or perhaps some of you had the opportunity to attend one of those meetings.

Each of us knows what a watershed is; it is your avocation and my vocation. But it is a lot more. A watershed is a drainage area where everyone must work together to solve common water quality problems. It means sharing information with each other about problems within a watershed. It means sharing solutions and working together to solve problems. Occasionally, it may mean working together to solve problems that cross over watershed boundaries. It means

sharing our knowledge with each other across political and cultural boundaries. It means sharing technical knowledge and expertise between treatment facilities regardless of their size and, yes, it means sharing financial resources with each other to implement water quality solutions within the watershed for the benefit of all the residents living in the watershed, not just necessarily in our own community. Water doesn't recognize municipal boundaries, it just keeps flowing - that's the way we need to work too.

It's a common sense approach to solve our shared ecological challenges. And I commend the Upper White River Watershed Alliance for taking on these challenges.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency estimates that the greatest water quality problem we face today is nonpoint source pollution.

As I am sure you know, nonpoint source pollution occurs when water flows over land or through the ground. The water picks up pollutants as it flows, depositing the contaminants in rivers and lakes.

Nonpoint source pollution is the last and, possibly, the toughest type of water pollution for us to combat. But we will meet and successfully address this challenge - we have to.

Nearly 30 years ago, the Clean Water Act forced us to face and address point source problems like wastewater treatment discharges. A lot of people wrung their hands. The problem was, and still is, huge. What were we going to do? How would we ever pay for the mandated improvements to our wastewater treatment facilities? Guess what? We are meeting the challenge. We have not entirely solved this problem, but we have made amazing progress. Working together set us in the right direction regarding point source pollution, and it can work now as we tackle the issue of nonpoint source pollution.

At IDEM, we believe the best approach to nonpoint source pollution is the environmentally sound, watershed-by-watershed approach.

This approach emphasizes implementing voluntary, best management practices across a watershed - from restoring forested portions of rivers and streams to installing oil and water separators to manage parking lot run-off.

Another tool in our proverbial toolbox is the Total Maximum Daily Load or TMDL model. A TMDL model generates a daily load of pollutants that a water body can assimilate and still achieve Indiana's water quality standards.

If we are to reach our goal of improving water quality in Indiana, it's crucial for NPDES permits holders to participate in developing a TMDL model for their particular watershed. These models are important. They will determine and allocate the appropriate share of pollutant load coming from point and nonpoint sources.

Then, once the allocation between point and nonpoint sources is known, each permit holder will be given a maximum daily load that it may discharge into the watershed.

We will need public and private partnerships to deal with nonpoint source pollution problems from urban to rural run-off. By working with local watershed representatives, like the Upper White River Watershed Alliance, each area can help determine how to share the responsibility for solving nonpoint source pollution problems and improve the water quality

Obviously, this will take a lot of work, time and planning at the local level. You may wonder how IDEM will fit into this locally-driven watershed approach. We anticipate playing an integral role in helping local watershed groups succeed.

First and foremost, IDEM has watershed basin coordinators to act as resource brokers for local watershed groups. Jim Dunaway, who spoke earlier, is the coordinator for the central part of Indiana, including this watershed. Our coordinators provide technical information on the basic How To's of best management practices and they bring an array of state and national expertise to your doorstep. They are also an excellent example of the multi-level of partnering necessary to approach all watershed projects. The three coordinators assigned to the northern, central and southern part of the state are on loan to IDEM from the federal government - they all are employees of the USDA NRCS, and they all have experience doing watershed work from their work with NRCS. They come to us with vast experience partnering with state agencies such as IDEM and DNR and of course the local SWCDs.

Right about now, you may be thinking, "Where's the money?" Remember Jerry McGuire and the movie's catch phrase "Show me the money!" I hear that from Hoosier public officials a lot.

An important part of the coordinator's job is to act as a financial resource broker, working with communities to secure State Revolving Funds for restoration plans, Section 319 Nonpoint Source Pollution grants and other special state and federal financial assistance programs.

We know that the need for financial assistance is great. My agency established a \$2 million grant program to assist with confined feeding operations. I have also called for a dedicated amount of the State Revolving Fund for Clean Water to be set aside for nonpoint source pollution projects.

As we speak, the SRF staff is working on the Clean Water Needs Survey, which I encourage you and your community to complete and return to IDEM. They are due back by Nov. 24. I brought several extra copies of this survey with me in case anyone wants one, so please make sure you get one if you haven't already.

While we see ourselves as resource brokers, we also believe that our water quality database will play a key role in helping you make better and more informed decisions at the local level.

We are developing a water quality database called AIMS. As you may know, IDEM is an agency of acronyms . . . we can't operate without acronyms, so let me tell you that AIMS stands for Assessment Information Management System. We are developing this system in-house and our own scientists are test driving it at this time. We hope to make it available to you and the public toward the end of 2001. The AIMS database will allow users to query the database with their water quality questions and issues and receive pertinent information on demand.

The Environmental Quality Service Council (EQSC), our legislative oversight committee, has formed a water quality data workgroup and I encourage you to attend those meetings, which are open to the public.

We have developed a comprehensive water quality-monitoring program aimed at completing a thorough review of Indiana's five major basins every five years. While this strategy provides a wealth of new and comprehensive data, we welcome ways to partner with projects you and your watershed organization may be doing on a local level that could enhance or complete our database.

Let me give you an example of what I mean.

Many of you are aware of the well-known watershed-monitoring program that Muncie has had in place for the past 25 years. That's the type of information we find very useful.

I want to take a moment to commend the outstanding achievement of John Craddock of Muncie, a pioneer in watershed and biological monitoring within Indiana, the United States and internationally. John, congratulations for a lifetime of outstanding service that has made a difference in our waterways.

I know that there are a lot more John Craddocks out there. One person really can make a huge difference. DNR field trips: It takes just one farmer to plant a buffer strip at the edge of his field next to a stream or river to greatly reduce pollutants entering the waterway from the field.

It just takes willingness, commitment and a little money to produce good environmental results. IDEM just announced a \$112,000 Section 319 grant was awarded to the City of Hammond. With this financial boost, the Hammond parks department plans to develop a wetland area to filter road salts and other run-off pollutants coming from the nearby highways. Instead of flowing into a local lake, they will be filtered.

These Section 319 grants are an important way to reduce a significant source of nonpoint source pollution. This money lets organizations implement their programs and enhance Indiana's efforts to clean up lakes and rivers.

For this watershed-based approach to be successful, no one entity, not even IDEM, should be the one to drive the process, but we certainly can be a partner in the process. Everyone in this room must take the initiative to work together as well as folks from other watersheds to share thoughts, ideas and processes and determine what works best for you and your community. We want to be partners, providing the best service to you and the residents of Indiana who rely on both of us to solve our water quality challenges.

Finally, I'd like to return to the topic that began this speech - last winter's contamination of the White. As you know, the U.S. EPA and IDEM joined to file parallel lawsuits on April 27 in the Federal District Court for the Southern District of Indiana.

I wish I could talk about the details of this suit, but I know you understand that I can't. But I can say that I am confident justice will be done. We will hold the responsible party or parties accountable for their actions.

I can tell you just a little bit about how we decided to file a civil action against Guide and Crown Environmental. Contrary to a lot of public comment, IDEM responded promptly and fully to the event. We certainly did learn some lessons though. We learned that we needed to improve the way we communicate to the public and the media about what we were doing.

Since then, we have put procedures in place to assure that the media, local county health departments and potentially affected communities and their residents receive timely information about contamination events.

Obviously, what occurred late last year was an extraordinary event, the likes of which Indiana had not experienced for many, many years and I hope we never experience again. The toxic Thiram and other pollutants registered at such a lethal concentration that, when combined with an extremely low water level, it killed almost every fish in the river for about 50 miles below the Anderson wastewater treatment plant.

So, how did we determine what killed the fish and how did we identify the responsible party?

First, we developed an internal team of scientists who used some of the most ultra-sensitive water quality testing methodologies available. Our scientists communicated with scientists around the world. What surprised us was that most of the international, as well as those within the US, scientific community had never seen or experienced anything like what occurred in the White River. Therefore, we had to work very closely with the handful of scattered scientists to verify our sampling and testing methodologies. We successfully identified and quantified toxic levels of Thiram and other pollutants all the way to Indianapolis.

I can not emphasize enough the challenges that our staff overcame to achieve these results in record time. The frustrating part was we couldn't tell the public before we filed the complaint. We could not jeopardize our investigation.

I am very proud that our staff kept this confidentiality right up to the point when we filed our joint action against Guide and Crown Environmental. We took the criticism, but in the end, we believe the outcome will best serve Hoosiers.

Also, our investigative team achieved significant results from working quietly against great odds to discover the truth of who did it. Again, I cannot go into very many details except to say that we have excellent water quality engineers and scientists on IDEM's staff. They worked long, hard and very effectively to calculate the significant loading of toxins into the Anderson wastewater treatment system from the Guide facility.

Finally, what did we learn as an agency? Communicate, communicate and communicate. And, then, communicate some more. We also learned that persistence pays off, because it led us to the responsible parties, which resulted in the filing of the civil suits.

Finally, I think people now fully understand how fragile our environment and water resources truly are and how important it is for us to protect them. Thank you for helping us protect our waterways - none of us can do it alone.

Thank you.